

VZCZCXRO2397
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #4225/01 3651429
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 311429Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5058
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004225

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2017

TAGS: PINS PGOV IR IZ PREL

SUBJECT: PRT MUTHANNA: SECURITY FORCE LEADER SAYS IRANIAN NETWORKS GREATEST THREAT

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a Muthanna PRT reporting cable.

¶2. (S/REL MNF-I) Summary and Comment: Colonel Ali al-Khawam, the leader of Muthanna's Criminal Intelligence Unit (CIU), sees Iranian influence and militia violence spreading from Basra as the greatest threats to stability in southern Iraq. According to Colonel Ali, "non-kinetic" development efforts geared to employment and outreach to the poor can drain the pool of militia recruits. The December 9 assassination of Babil Police Chief LTG Qais underscored the vulnerability of key provincial security leaders, including Colonel Ali. The MOI must provide Col. Ali with appropriate security equipment. MOI designation of the CIU as an I-SWAT unit could also provide Colonel Ali with crucial leverage in his efforts to disrupt Tehran's networks and counter the Iranian-backed militias. End Summary and Comment.

¶3. (S/REL MNF-I) PRT Muthanna met with Colonel Ali al-Khawam, commander of Muthanna's premier anti-militia strike force, on December 13. Colonel Ali profusely thanked us for MNF-I's help in overcoming efforts by Sadrists elements within the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to sack him and acknowledged he was deeply in our debt. The conversation then turned to a wide ranging discussion of the threats facing Muthanna and southern Iraq.

FEAR OF GROWING IRANIAN INFLUENCE FROM BASRAH

¶4. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali expressed concern about Basrah: "Basrah is almost completely under Iranian control. They had this for years as their long-term objective. It is a vital part of their strategy to control and indirectly govern southern Iraq." He foresaw a spillover in the coming months of the JAM threat from Basrah to neighboring Muthanna and Dhi Qar.

MONEY BUYS RECRUITS AND PROTECTION

¶5. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali stated that Iran has established a well-developed training program for militia members in camps near the border. He explained that liberal training stipends, along with the promise of future payments once back in Iraq, created an ample pool of recruits from among the poor, young men of Samawah, Rumaytha, and Khidr.

¶6. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali said militia members returning to Iraq fell under the command of operatives with long-standing ties to Iran. While OMS and JAM in Muthanna were nominally led by Nasiriyah-based Ali al-Khorasani and Sayyid Uday, they were considered "foreigners" because of their Basrawi origins. According to Colonel Ali, the most prominent and dangerous JAM commander in Muthanna was Halim Bashir Atiyah al-Hassani. Halim, who headed Tehran's lethal aid smuggling network in Muthanna, used Iranian money to ply

tribal sheikhs, recruit disaffected youth, and run at least one assassination cell. Halim targeted his recruiting effort particularly on the Albu Eaynayn and Abdulhussein branches of the Albu Hassan and the al-Abbas tribes, with promises of money and luxury goods.

¶7. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali observed that Halim represented a case study of how Iran operates. Halim used a relative, Abu Sajad Gharawi, a fellow JAM commander in the Maysani capital of Amara, as a conduit to Iran. Gharawi, along with his operations officer, Haydar, facilitated Halim's travel through Maysan to Iran, supplied him money, weapons, and vehicles, and transferred Halim's militia trainees across the border. According to Colonel Ali, Halim's "gifts" to tribal sheikhs included cars and up to \$3,000 in cash in exchange for safe passage through and safe havens in their areas. Colonel Ali stated that much of Iran's lethal aid passed through the al-Abbas tribal area located between Khidr and Samawah spanning the northern and southern sides of the Euphrates.

¶8. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali said even though he knew where Halim lived southeast of Rumaytha, he could not arrest him because he was under the powerful protection of the Albu Eaynayn tribe. "They'll defend him as one of their own," Colonel Ali remarked ruefully.

"NON-KINETIC" EFFORTS TO REDUCE POOL OF RECRUITS

¶9. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali said the PRT could help counter Iranian influence in Muthanna by undertaking projects that helped the poor and provided them jobs, thereby reducing the number of potential recruits for the militias. By giving

BAGHDAD 00004225 002 OF 002

credit for these projects to key Albu Hassan sheikhs, such as Abu Chefat, the PRT could boost the influence of strong, tough leaders who could counter and constrain Halim's influence within the tribe.

NEED FOR MORE AND BETTER EQUIPMENT

¶10. (S/REL MNF-I) Coupled with "non-kinetic" efforts to drain the pool of potential JAM recruits, Colonel Ali advocated intensified ISF strikes against Iranian networks and JAM proxies. The CIU was willing and able to do so, Colonel Ali said, but needed more and better equipment and greater logistics and political support. We noted that the MOI had begun to designate key strike units within each province as I-SWAT units, and provided these units with advanced equipment and improved logistics. Colonel Ali said he would pursue I-SWAT designation with the MOI, noting that his unit was the only force in the province that merited the title.

¶11. (S/REL MNF-I) While confident that he could suppress Iranian influenced JAM violence, Colonel Ali worried about the uncertain levels of GOI resources and support, commenting that much of his current equipment was inadequate. He held up a Saudi-origin VHF hand-held radio and remarked wryly, "This is the best I've got." Asked what additional equipment could improve the CIU's effectiveness, Colonel Ali listed his most critical needs:

-- 25 up-armored Humvees for strike operations against desert smugglers;
-- 250 M-16/M-4 rifles with scopes;
-- 20 sniper rifles;
-- Night vision equipment;
-- Explosive ordnance disposal training and equipment; and,
-- Radios with a range of 120km.

¶12. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali wondered if the central government, which - as the effort to fire him showed - was divided and weak, was capable of dealing with the threat. He

pointed to the recent killing of LTG Qais al-Mamuri, saying, "If Iran was not directly responsible for General Qais, death, it had a hand in the affair." He stated that Qais, killing was having a ripple effect on other anti-militia security commanders around the country, highlighting their acute vulnerability and intimidating them from being pro-active.

COMMENT

13. (S/REL MNF-I) Since August 2007 we have pursued exactly the type of "non-kinetic" strategy advocated by Colonel Ali. Using Quick Response Funds, we have reached out to key tribal leaders and moderate clerics in order to reinforce stability and counter the noxious influence of the militias. We will continue to develop and expand this approach in 2008.

14. (S/REL MNF-I) The CIU is widely recognized as Muthanna's most capable anti-terrorist unit. Designating it as an I-SWAT unit would reinforce Colonel Ali's ability to counter the Iranian-backed militias and disrupt the smuggling networks in the province. To that end, Colonel Ali will seek designation of his unit as an I-SWAT unit, and should be supported in this by the Mission if necessary.

15. (S/REL MNF-I) Colonel Ali is an extremely able and charismatic commander, who leads by personal example. He has survived numerous assassination attempts. His loss would represent a significant setback to the security of the province, thus it is important that he and his security detail have the necessary equipment to protect him from assassination.

CROCKER